The Washington merry-go-round

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WASHINGTON — The infamous House UnAmerican Activities Committee, whose witch hunts terrorized Washington in the 1940s, simply won't let go of the public purse strings.

This was the committee that made Richard Nixon, as a young communist hunter, a national figure. But because of its irresponsible tactics, the committee became badly discredited.

At first, its members merely changed the name to the House Internal Security Committee and dressed it in sheep's clothes. But this didn't fool the public. So the House voted last January to disband the committee altogether.

Thus the committee disappeared, presto, from public view, unblessed and unmourned. But its staff and its files remained behind. The dethroned chairman, Richard Ichord, D-Mo., urged House Judiciary Chairman Peter Rodino, D-N.J., to absorb the entire staff into his own fold and to carry on the investigations.

After months of haggling, Rodino agreed to retain eight of the dispossessed subversive hunters. This will cost the taxpayers $140,244 a year.

But 30 other investigators, research analysts, secretaries and clerks remained on the congressional payroll until June 30. Most of them just hung around, looking sinister, at a cost to the taxpayers of another $236,296 in salaries.

What the UnAmerican Activities staff really considers unAmerican, apparently, is cutting off their public funds.

ASSASSINATION PLOTS — There has been secret, sworn testimony that the CIA and FBI have plotted occasionally to murder enemy agents in this country.

We have been unable to document a single murder case. But at least two witnesses have testified that they were asked by the CIA or FBI to commit murder.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has also obtained vouchers, which prove exotic assassination weapons have been sold to U.S. agencies. Senate investigators have evidence, furthermore, that assassination teams were trained at secret sites somewhere in southeastern United States. Both government and contract employes were taught how to use James Bond-style assassination weapons.

CIA employes have acknowledged to us that assassination plots have been discussed in their presence. The plotters were squeamish, said one source, about using the words "assassination" and "murder." They spoke more delicately about "eliminating" or "getting rid" of a troublesome communist agent. But there was no question, insisted the source, that they were talking about murder.

Another source stressed that a Soviet spy or double agent might be marked for murder only if he were considered "a tremendous threat" to U.S. interests. Then the CIA wouldn't use one of its own agents but would recruit an outsider "to do the job," the source said.

Normally, the CIA would try, he said, to maneuver the victim out of the country before arranging his disappearance. But one CIA source, with only second-hand knowledge of the case, told of a spy who was thrown off a New York City bridge. A cooperative police lieutenant allegedly submitted a suicide report on the victim. We have been unable, however, to confirm the incident.

In secret testimony before the Rockefeller Commission, Frank Sturgis of the Watergate break-in squad confessed that he had once been asked to commit a murder for the CIA in the Miami area.

He discussed with a CIA agent, Sturgis testified, how to dispose of the body. One plan was to dump it into shark-infested waters near the Bahamas. They also considered ditching the body in the Everglades swamp, Sturgis swore.

The agent promised to identify the victim at a subsequent meeting. But, according to Sturgis' account, he began to have misgivings. He wanted to be sure the agent wasn't trying to use him to kill a personal enemy.

So at the second meeting, Sturgis insisted that the assassination order would have to be confirmed by a CIA staff officer. That was the last, testified Sturgis, he heard of the scheme. The CIA has denied having anything to do with domestic murder plots.

At a secret Senate hearing, meanwhile, an FBI informant in Tampa, Joseph Burton, testified that his FBI contact wanted him to do away with an alleged revolutionary.

The bizarre plot called for Burton to conspire with the radical, Richard Arvedon, to kidnap a federal judge. Then Burton would gun down Arvedon on the judge's property, making it look as if a revolutionary plot had backfired, Burton testified.

He identified his FBI contact as agent Robert Heibel, who allegedly told him that Washington had approved the plan to kill Arvedon. This is vigorously denied by the FBI, which denounced as "spurious" the "innumerable allegations" Burton has made against the FBI.

Arvedon's attorneys, Judith Petersen of Tampa and David Rosenberg of Cambridge, Mass., told us: "We have been aware for some time that both the FBI and the Justice Department have had knowledge of (the assassination plot).

"From sworn affidavits we have seen, we believe the plot to kill Arvedon existed. We do not know the dimension or the scope of what was involved, whether wiretapping or other surveillance was utilized and how long the plot was in effect, but we are making efforts to determine the answer to these questions."

HOFFA'S SUCCESSOR: While the search continues for the body of ex-Teamsters boss Jimmy Hoffa, his successor, Frank Fitzsimmons, is moving into a $270,000 home under the California sun.

With LES WHITTEN

Hoffa is believed to be a mobster victim. Fitzsimmons' new house reportedly was built by a company with mobster ties.

The La Costs Land Company, which constructed the Fitzsimmons hacienda, allegedly was established with mobster money. Title to the house was transferred to Fitzsimmons, according to our investigation, on July 10.

Although Fitzsimmons heads the nation's most powerful union, two subcontractors admitted to us that they used non-union labor on his home. Another company used non-union labor in furnishing some of the concrete for the home.

Fitzsimmons has stated that he wasn't sure whether he would purchase the house. But the architect's plans in our possession are marked "Fitzsimmons' home." The plans were drawn by the San Diego architectural firm of Paul Thoryk and Associates.

A spokesman for La Costa said he was unaware that non-union labor had been used. "All the people we do business with are union," he said. He said the use of non-union labor was a violation of the contract.

We spoke to several subcontractors who said they were paid by La Costa. The spokesman said Fitzsimmons paid La Costa for the home.

Footnote: We made repeated calls to Fitzsimmons' office for his comments. The calls were not returned. We also called his lawyers who refused to discuss the La Costa project.